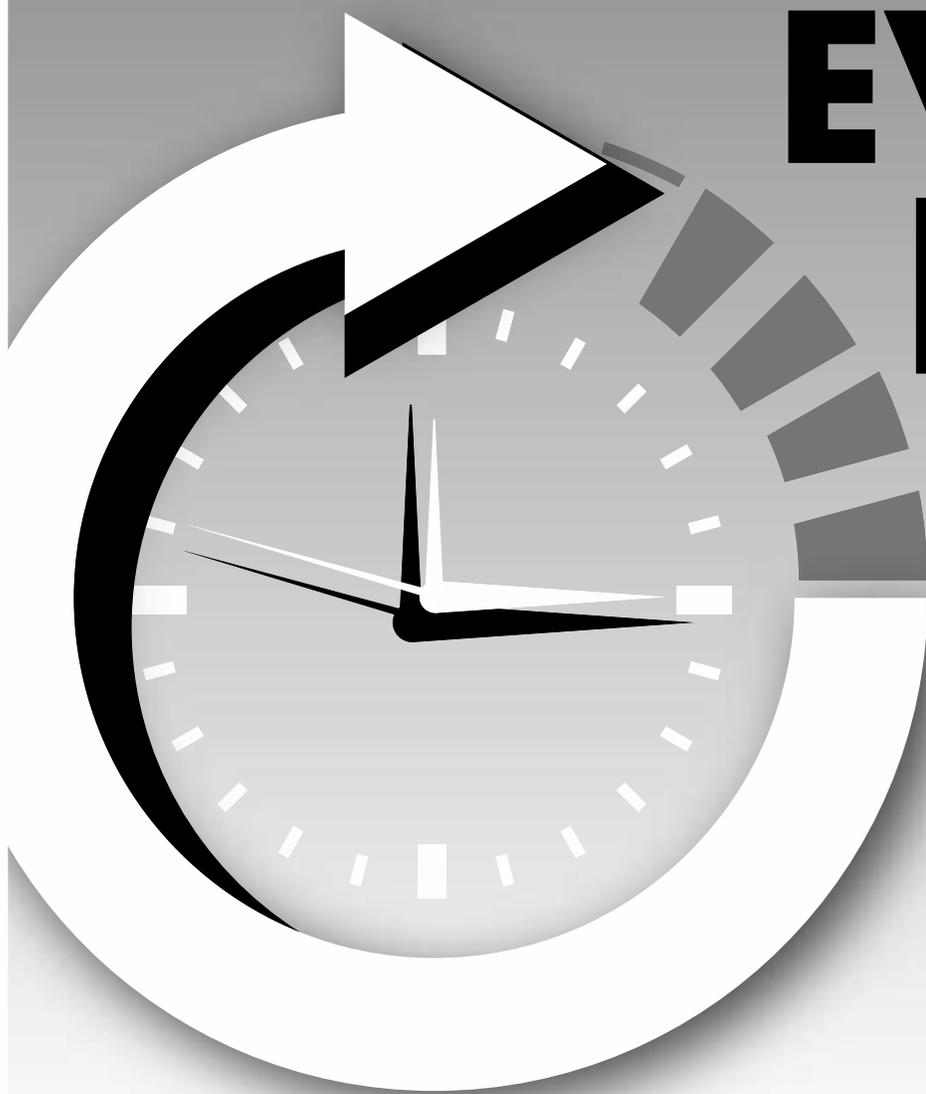


THE PRINCIPAL'S PLAYBOOK

TO MAKING

EVERY
DAY
COUNT



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Preface: The Missing String

At the elementary orchestra concert, I watched the teacher prepare one hundred beginning violinists who were warming up for their first public concert. With grace and poise, she modeled proper position and posture. The students, in turn, tried ever so hard to imitate her as they held their instruments, some with the calm appearance of a seasoned professional and others struggling awkwardly with their strange protuberances.

The concert was glorious enough that parents and grandparents could take a thousand pictures, but short enough that most of the younger siblings made it through the final number without coming unglued. I stepped up afterward to congratulate the teacher who was graciously accepting a single white daisy from one of her young charges. She glowed with the compliment, and then I asked, as an afterthought, “Is that a new violin? It sounded a bit different tonight.”

She smiled and confessed that when she was warming up her students, only seconds before the first number, one of the four strings had popped. She made a quick decision to adjust and play with three strings rather than disrupt the fragile chemistry of nervous students finally confident enough to play for an audience.

The teacher and I laugh at that story when we recall it, but that evening’s challenge, when overcome, demonstrated to both of us that no matter what the challenge, the show would go on!

Every day, some staff member in your school is performing a feat analogous to playing the violin with three strings. It might be a teacher with limited or improvised educational materials or a maintenance worker who is making a repair because the replacement part is not available. As a leader, find the stories and acknowledge the qualities they represent. You may laugh—or even cry—but they reveal the way staff live out their commitment to students.

Introduction

Whether this is your first year as a principal or your 21st, it is always beneficial to return to the basics of your profession and your life. That's what this book is: the basics. It's what you need for the first days, the last days, and every day in between to help you be the best principal you can be. Sometimes it feels as though the world is on your shoulders, and it can help to be reminded of your priorities: students, parents, staff members, and the community that supports you and relies on you to educate their precious young ones.

As you know, it's not possible to be an expert in every area of professional practice that falls within your responsibilities. It's impossible to know everything about everything. But it is possible to gather together professionals with very different experiences and levels of learning to help each other grow and succeed. Consider this book as a gathering of principals and other administrators—they're sharing the insights that have come through many years of mistakes and successes on topics common to everyone: time management, leadership, interpersonal relationships, and much, much more.

Rekindling the fire that consumed you as a brand-new principal (or making good use of it if you still have it) can happen when you take the time to turn inward and consider your steps. Every principal should take time to examine his or her own motivation and ability to meet the needs of the audiences he or she works so hard to please. Perhaps it is now your turn. And if, at the end of the year, you can say you made a difference with each audience, you'll consider your year a resounding success. So who are these target audiences?

Self. Your toughest critic may be that person you see in the mirror each morning. Each year you have a chance to start over, to do good work, and to make a difference. As you view yourself as an audience, judge your actions kindly, but be a tough critic committed to achieving the results you want.

Students. The success of students is the ultimate test of the success of the school. From the very start of the year, you need to convince students of this fact—that your goals are their goals. Moreover, you must communicate your message in what you do as well as what you say. Everyone at the school is here for the sole purpose of ensuring the students' success.

Staff. The school's teachers, custodians, cooks, paraeducators, administrative assistants, and other staff members are the "workers in the vineyard" of children's learning. To this audience you must be a constant and consistent leader, expressing hope and support. They will face frustrations, but if you are clearly focused on goals for students, staff members will come through the year recognizing your leadership and their accomplishments in educating young people.

Parents. Helping students maximize their achievement without the enthusiastic support of parents is impractical. A fitting parallel to the African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child" might be "It takes an involved parent to wholly educate a

child.” Parents must be enlisted as active partners of the school to help their children achieve the results that the school, the principal, and the parents want.

Community. Schools are products of the community in which they exist. But your school may be tempted to operate as though it is the only bastion of sanity in an increasingly complex and confusing world. The reality is that schools must work within the community, serving its needs and meeting its goals for the education of children, while at the same time providing a guiding beacon to lead to a new, progressive, open, and learned society.

This book helps you keep these audiences in mind and gives you the tools necessary for satisfying the needs of each one. Additionally, each chapter in this book contains tips for communication and leadership, most have a checklist or other resource that can help you organize your efforts, and all include reflection questions designed to help you think for a moment about the content and how it will influence your future actions. Taking advantage of these resources will help you gain the full benefit from this book and will allow you to think more carefully about the way you interact with others.

1 | Demonstrating Your Leadership from the First Day

It's a humbling realization: What you do and say in the first few hours of the school year will set the tone for the entire year. So where do you start? Whether you are a new or experienced principal, you must demonstrate through your first words and actions that you are the leader of the school community. To provide a solid foundation for the entire year, you must have a plan which guarantees that students, teachers, support staff, and parents are energized and confident in your vision for a successful year and your ability to lead them.

Building a Shared Focus

While practical considerations may overwhelm your schedule at the outset of the school year, it is imperative that your philosophical goals also be outlined and shared at this time. Carrying out day-to-day tasks becomes less of a chore for everyone when teachers and staff are united by purposeful and satisfying goals. Fortunately, you can make the task of creating a shared focus easier and the results more positive by following these steps:

Spend some time defining the most appropriate overarching focus for the year. Connect the focus to important, long-term organizational plans and challenges. Avoid making it this year's "new thing." Be certain that it's aligned with the organizational mission of teaching and learning and that it's specific enough for everyone within the organization to relate to and take ownership of. Generally, you will want to avoid areas of focus that are specific to curriculum content or grade level as these will leave some staff members unaccountable. You will also want to ensure that the focus encompasses all or almost all types of students you serve. Three examples you might select include:

- Providing quality feedback to students.
- Intervening early when students struggle.
- Nurturing high levels of student engagement.

Research has proven that each of these strategies provides benefits to students at all ability levels, even though the impact is greatest for students who struggle.

Spend time talking about and getting feedback on the focus area before presenting it publicly and formally. Teachers, fellow administrators, and even students can provide valuable perspectives and assist you to calibrate your message in ways that will increase understanding and acceptance. Listen carefully to what is said and even consider using the feedback anonymously in your formal presentation. This feedback will help you further connect the focus with the people who will be asked to carry out the focus when school starts.

Be specific about what can be done and how the focus will be translated into action. For most people, accepting broad statements is generally easy, but translating the concepts into action can be challenging. In addition, position the focus to be uplifting, inspiring, and appealing to the best of what people want to be. The

potential of the focus to improve the learning of students and their success in school can be a powerful motivator. But people need to know specifically what they can do to make a difference.

Streamlining the First Days of School

Building a shared focus will provide a foundation for learning and teaching to build on. As the first days of school unfold, you'll want to take further steps to ensure that the entire experience is pleasant for everyone and goes as smoothly as possible. Focus your efforts on the following actions as you prepare for the first contact with your school community.

Make direct contact with each group as soon as possible. You may see the teachers by chance as they individually return to get their classrooms prepared. But you must also schedule a meeting that brings all of them together and focuses on their role as members of a team committed to success for all students. Meaningful introductions may be overwhelming in large schools and may not seem necessary in small schools, but do not neglect this opportunity for teachers to present themselves as they are at this moment, bursting with enthusiasm for a new start. This is a time for new beginnings and new hopes.

Schedule similar first contacts with students and support staff. Your message should be clear: "I want you to be successful, and I'm here to make that happen." It is also important to schedule parent meetings prior to the first day of school to express your enthusiasm and your vision for a successful year for all students. Your visibility, expression of availability, and presentation of yourself as the leader are vital to your success.

Make sure you connect personally with all staff members at the beginning of the first day of school.

This can be an encouraging note saying, "I'm looking forward to working with you this year." It can be a token such as a lapel pin or notepad. Whatever you choose to do, the message should be, "I'm on your team and we will make this a successful school year!"

Give faculty and staff the information they need to be successful in their first contact with students and parents.

Prioritize the business of getting ready so that up-to-date student rosters, schedules, and bus and lunch procedures are

COMMUNICATION: When You Forget a Name

Occasionally, you encounter someone you haven't seen in a long time or a person you've met but whose name you cannot recall. When this happens, here are two simple strategies you can use.

- Introduce yourself and note where you met or that it has been a long time since you talked with this person. The other person will almost always give you his or her name.
- Admit that you have forgotten the other person's name, but note something specific you remember about him or her such as a conversation, the place you met, or the person who introduced you. While not remembering a name can be embarrassing, remembering something specific about the person sends a message of recognition that can offset the gaffe.

Regardless, it is usually best not to act as though you know someone's name when you do not. As often as not, the situation will become even more awkward and embarrassing.

available. Teachers have enough to worry about as it is and shouldn't need to worry about these basic issues.

Generate specific forms for communicating information. There is so much going on this time of year that you and your staff may not receive or remember important information. Distribute specific forms for faculty and staff to give you information, for parents to give teachers information, and for students to give teachers information. This form of communication tells others that you value their input.

Walk through your building to make sure it is ready. Like the pilot of a passenger airplane readying for takeoff, the principal of a school needs to thoroughly inspect the building before the school year takes flight. Don't leave this to someone else, and do make sure you take as co-pilots the custodian and another administrator to help identify problem areas, so you can recognize and agree on priorities.

Students and parents will enter with new expectations. They should see interesting displays and welcoming messages throughout the building. Don't forget that the sights and smells of cleanliness make an impression that will remain in the memory of each person who enters. Neatness conveys a sense of organization. Readiness builds confidence.

Making a Fantastic First Impression

It is often said that you can recognize a successful school almost as soon as you walk through the door—and well before you examine test scores or check state rankings. For most people, this observation comes as a result of the general feeling a school evokes. In the best of schools, it is a sense of welcome and belonging coupled with an attitude of seriousness and high expectations.

So what are the components that we can monitor and maintain to make a great first impression that's backed up with substance?

Cleanliness. As a visitor approaches and enters the building, he or she notices the building is clean and generally in good condition. While cleanliness and building condition may not directly contribute to student learning, the condition of the building helps communicate a sense of pride and respect, and it contributes to a safe and healthy environment within which to learn. The cleanliness and condition of the school also communicate the compassion and respect adults have for the students in the school.

Signage. Signs and instructions for visitors and students are positive in tone and clear in direction. They create a sense of welcome while providing helpful guidance regarding where to find key offices and facilities, as well as expectations for behavior.

Displays. Student work and symbols of accomplishment are prominently displayed. Student artwork, awards from academic competitions, exemplary class work, athletic trophies and awards, and other evidence of student performance are prominently displayed to recognize achievement and encourage even greater performance.

Greetings. Introductions and any other interactions with adults and students are welcoming, helpful, and respectful. Visitors feel noticed and receive a message of openness and community.

Learning environments. Visitors can see that students are actively engaged in learning. Whether students are involved in a discussion, working in small groups, or studying individually, a sense of purpose and accomplishment is obvious.

Classroom management. Visitors see teachers who are effectively managing the classroom and student behavior. Discipline is attended to immediately and effectively, and a sense of order and cooperation is apparent.

Exterior maintenance. We have all heard the adage “Don’t judge a book by its cover,” yet we often do just that. The same dynamic applies to schools. When the lawn and parking lot are strewn with garbage, the grass is not mowed, the bushes are not trimmed, lights are burned out, and signage is out of date, you risk being judged by your “cover.”

The fact is that most people in the community spend very little, if any, time inside schools. Yet they may drive or walk past schools with relative frequency. The external appearance of the buildings and grounds may be the only firsthand information they have regarding the quality of your schools, the pride you take in your work, and the wisdom of the investment they are making with their tax dollars.

Consider sharing the checklists that accompany this chapter with a parent or community member and invite the individual to visit the school unannounced to assess your school’s performance. Or take the checklists yourself, leave the campus, and return as though you are visiting for the first time. Use them to guide your observations and to create your own list of areas to celebrate as well as those that need improvement.

LEADERSHIP: Details Matter

Some people may have great vision, outstanding conceptual skills, and a natural talent for motivating others, but if they fail to manage the important details, they almost always limit the effects of their leadership. When people discover that they can’t be depended on to do the follow-up work necessary for transforming ideas into action, confidence begins to erode, frustration grows, and commitment to their leadership begins to slip.

If following up and managing details are not strengths you possess, the credibility of your leadership probably depends on your taking one or more of the following three actions.

- Discipline yourself to think through the steps required to move your ideas into plans that can work. Commit the steps to writing. Put the steps on your calendar and to-do list, and check each item off as you complete it.
- Work closely with your assistant or an associate who has strong detail-management and follow-up skills. Decide together how you can ensure that follow-through will be reliable and consistent. People do not always expect you personally to make things happen, but they do want to see results.
- Clarify whether the ideas and possibilities you suggest are for exploration and discussion purposes only. If you don’t intend to follow through, be sure that everyone understands what you do and do not intend to do. By being clear about your commitment, you help others manage their expectations and diminish the frustration and disappointment that comes when they buy into your idea, only to find that it goes nowhere.

CHECKLIST:

Making a Fantastic First Impression Inside

- The building smells fresh and is clean. It has been well-maintained.
- The front office is organized, clean, and inviting. Guests feel comfortable if they have to wait, and there is adequate seating. Scheduled appointments are met punctually.
- The first staff members visitors meet (often administrative assistants and custodians) are knowledgeable and friendly. They welcome strangers with a smile and offer the assistance visitors need.
- Hallways and staircases are clean, plus all lights and exit signs work properly.
- Signage is positive and clear. Restrooms, water fountains, the cafeteria, and other facilities are clean, in good condition, and clearly marked.
- Emergency plans are clearly posted, and all emergency exits are free from debris.
- Bulletin boards are full of examples of work that display a focus on children—instead of rules.
- Classrooms and personal workspaces (including teachers', support staff members', and your own) are orderly.
- Students are interested in learning and are engaged.
- All safety devices in shops, weight rooms, and labs work properly.
- The needs of children and guests with disabilities are well-served.

CHECKLIST:

Making a Fantastic First Impression Outside

- The front door, door handles, windows, railings, and entry areas to the school are clean.
- All entry and exit door locks work properly.
- Every external building light and parking lot light works properly.
- Traffic areas, bus loading zones, and parking lots are well-marked and safe for drivers and pedestrians.
- The school property is trash-free.
- If the school property is landscaped, the plants are trimmed and healthy.
- As guests arrive, they feel welcome. There are parking places that essentially say, “Visiting Parents, We’re Glad You Are Here!”
- The front entrance is clearly marked in the languages of the families served by the district.
- Signage is clean and spelled correctly. All outside signs are well-lit at night.
- School rules are posted in an organized manner at the front entrance.
- Outside areas such as playgrounds, commons, and other student gathering places are supervised. Students and staff are interacting, rather than students being huddled next to the building with staff blowing whistles and hollering at kids.
- The students on the playground are engaged in friendly exercises with rules that ensure safety and fair play.

Reflection Questions

First Thoughts

1. What do I think about what I just read?

2. Would I have given the same advice or instruction? Why or why not?

3. Which ideas had I considered before? Which ideas were new?

Planning

1. What part of my professional practice would need to be changed in light of this information?

2. What am I already doing correctly?

Application

1. How does this information correlate to my situation?

2. What did I learn that is not relevant to my situation?

Action

1. Three changes I'm planning to implement as a result of this reading are:

2. When do I plan to make these changes?

3. What might I have to do to make these changes possible?
